

The difference of a decade

Last time around, there were a lot of known unknowns. We were told of aluminum tubes and a mushroom cloud that only National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice could see, and shown a picture of a white van that Vice President Dick Cheney swore to Secretary of State Colin Powell was a mobile weapons lab. President George W. Bush preferred to act before knowing the knowns rather than take the risk that actual information — the findings of United Nations weapons inspectors — might thwart his dream of invading Iraq to remove Saddam Hussein.



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This time, we have as much certainty as you can have that the weapons of mass destruction exist, were used by Syrian President Bashar Assad and killed 1,500 of his citizens. We have pictures of children foaming at the mouth and bodies lined up in a makeshift morgue.

And yet, in 2003, with almost nothing to go on, Congress voted in favor of invading Iraq. In 2013, with everything to go on, it's going to be an uphill slog to get lawmakers to approve a limited punitive strike against the Syrian government.

The difference today is that President Barack Obama is up against a House of Representatives that doesn't take advice or follow its leader.

The one Republican you didn't hear crying for a congressional vote on Syria was House Speaker John Boehner. He can't get his caucus together to vote on things that are in its interest to pass; imagine trying to herd his cats to a vote on Syria. On Tuesday, Boehner emerged from the White House to say he would support

Obama and urged his colleagues to do the same. Good luck to the speaker in bringing together his hawks, who believe the president is a wimp and that we should have bombed Syria to smithereens yesterday, with his isolationists, who can't name a war they would fight.

Part of the problem is Obama.

To hurt him, his opponents are willing to hurt themselves more. Even though they had even more to gain from immigration reform than Democrats, Republicans couldn't get a bipartisan bill to a vote in the House. And although the public will certainly blame them, many Republicans are itching to shut down the government on any pretext — defunding Obama's health-care law, curbing

the budget, raising the debt ceiling. Stars such as Sens. Ted Cruz and Rand Paul will line up to flip off the lights at the Washington Monument.

In fact, the likes of Cruz and Paul have replaced measured, politics-stops-at-the-water's-edge Republicans such as former Sens. Richard Lugar and Olympia Snowe. There's a new breed of senator who knows everything upon arrival and is too much in a hurry to get to the Oval Office to stop and think. Obama will never get their support.

Besides ambition, add lopsided poll. At the same time Americans overwhelmingly want Obama to consult Congress, they overwhelmingly don't want to intervene in Syria. Taken together, you can only conclude that the public is hoping Congress stops the president.

It's likely that even in the face of life and death, the default position of opposing the president no matter what will prevail. That's more compelling than sending a message to the Syrian regime, which

has used WMDs, and others such as Iran and North Korea that may hope to.

Even Republicans in favor of action can't agree on the kind of action to take. On Sunday, Sen. John McCain said it would be "catastrophic" not to strike Syria but that he could only support Obama if the president committed to winning on the battlefield, forcing Assad from power and arming the Syrian rebels.

Obama wishes for those outcomes but isn't prepared to expose U.S. troops while trying to achieve them in the terrible crossfire of a civil (and religious) war. It's hard to see how he gets straight with McCain and his close ally Sen. Lindsey Graham. Go too far in their direction, and Obama risks losing his left-wing doves and anti-interventionists/isolationists; don't go far enough, and he gives succor to the too-little, too-late caucus.

By going to Congress, Obama empowers 535 would-be commanders-in-chief who see Gen. George Patton in the mirror each morning. But there's also the slight chance that congressional involvement will improve the response to Syria, pushing it beyond a small strike to degrading Assad's arsenal and arming non-jihadist rebels with sophisticated weapons without exposing U.S. troops to harm or getting mired in a Middle East conflict. We've done that already.

Punishing Assad may not accomplish much, but not punishing him sets a terrible precedent: that we will let pass the use of chemical weapons. Even though the something to be done isn't perfect, something is sometimes all you can get.

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Dinner with the devil

In a bustling restaurant in Damascus in 2009, at a table shielded by a fountain, two attractive and well-dressed couples enjoyed what appeared to be a double date. They were then-Sen. John Kerry and Teresa Heinz Kerry, Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad and his wife, Asma.

Looking at the photo, I could imagine Kerry asking, "Bashar, could you pass me the olive oil?" It was to the dictator's left, and surely he would have obliged. Just because the man is capable of slaughtering his own people doesn't mean he lacks proper manners.



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That was before the Arab Spring, when the then-chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee was making what his former spokesman told me Wednesday was a full-court diplomatic press in response to indications that Assad wanted closer U.S. ties. The dominos reached Syria two years ago, and the regime has been fighting rebel forces ever since. Last month, Kerry's dinner companion fired rockets filled with sarin gas into a Damascus suburb, killing 1,400 men, women and children. President Obama had warned the Syrian bully not to use chemical weapons and drew a "red line." Assad chose not to cross that line; he vaporized it instead.

The world is outraged by such a barbaric act but should not be surprised. We've known about Syria's stockpile of chemical weapons and Assad's brutality. He watched as Libya's Muammar Gaddafi was plucked out of a sewer pipe and Egypt's Hosni Mubarak tossed in jail. Of course he would use chemical weapons to avoid losing power and falling into the hands of the opposition.

There are no good options for the United States, but doing nothing

is not an option. It's a shame we didn't act two years ago when we could have armed the rebels and helped eliminate al-Qaida factions trying to capitalize on the chaos.

Sen. Lindsey Graham met with President Obama on Monday and is calling for a comprehensive strategy that clarifies not only what military action we will undertake but also what we do after. I hope the president is listening.

I doubt any state has sacrificed more for the cause of freedom — in the Middle East and around the world — than South Carolina. Our citizens never have shied away from a fight when our liberty or someone else's was at stake. We are tired after a decade of war and crave

peace, but murdering defenseless civilians and children with chemical weapons is something I believe we are willing to fight over. But we deserve a detailed plan that spells out how we go in and how we get out.

We must respond strongly and in a way that hurts Assad and deters him, Iran and any other country from ever thinking about using weapons of mass destruction. Best case: An overwhelming military strike and subsequent assistance weaken Assad's grip on power, win the hearts of ordinary Syrians and provide the Free Syrian Army a window to topple this criminal regime.

Once Assad is out of power, perhaps Secretary of State Kerry could enjoy a follow-up dinner in Damascus and ask how he's enjoying his just desserts. Better yet, maybe Assad will be gone forever.

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